

## Human–Animal Relations in Victorian Popular Literature and Culture

A special issue of *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal*

Guest-edited by Bethany Dahlstrom and Helena Esser



Victorian popular fiction is replete with animals – racing horses, loyal dogs, caged birds, exotic creatures, and anthropomorphic companions. These beings carried immense symbolic significance: they could function as status symbols, metaphors for the body or soul, expressions of sentiment, or instruments of moral instruction. Animals also frequently offered a lens through which Victorians addressed issues surrounding empire, industrialisation, science, social mobility, and domesticity. In popular fiction, animals were not merely background – they were moral barometers, class indicators, narrative devices, and symbols of broader anxieties regarding industrialisation, gender roles, and empire. This issue invites new critical perspectives on the cultural significance, narrative functions, and symbolic roles of animals in popular texts. We particularly encourage work that integrates literary analysis with interdisciplinary approaches drawn from animal studies, ecocriticism, the history of science, or visual culture.

By foregrounding the presence of animals in popular fiction, this issue seeks to highlight how texts consumed by mass Victorian readerships engaged with species that were at once ordinary and symbolically charged. Penny dreadfuls, sensation novels, serialised romances, children's books, and other widely circulating forms often placed animals at the heart of their narratives – as companions, plot catalysts, or emblems of social and cultural concerns. These

creatures provided writers and readers alike with opportunities to grapple with questions of morality, identity, class, empire, and scientific change within accessible and entertaining forms. By examining animals in the popular literary marketplace, we can gain a deeper understanding of how human-animal relations were mediated, negotiated, and contested throughout the Victorian period. We will consider global and long-nineteenth-century texts, provided they advance our understanding of Victorian popular fiction.

This special issue of the *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal* invites contributions on the varied roles and representations of animals in popular fiction and culture during the Victorian period. We particularly welcome submissions that focus on companion animals, in various interpretations of the phrase, although all animal studies are encouraged.

Topics might include (but are not limited to):

- Horses in sensation fiction, melodrama, or adventure narratives
- Bird-keeping, millinery, and the fashion animal in women's fiction
- Anthropomorphised animals in children's and juvenile literature
- The sentimentalisation of animals in domestic and didactic fiction
- Animals as class markers or indicators of social status
- Urban vs. rural animal lives in fiction
- Darwin, evolution, and popular reimaginings of animals
- Working animals and critiques of industrial society
- Animal cruelty, welfare, and RSPCA themes in fiction
- Nonhuman agency or animal-centred narrative perspectives
- Colonial animals and empire-building in imperial tales
- Animal illustrations, cover art, and visual cultures of the period
- Reimaginings of Victorian human-animal relationships in neo-Victorian texts
- Transnational examination of human-animal relationships

Submissions may adopt literary-critical, historical, or interdisciplinary approaches, provided they remain relevant to Victorian *popular fiction*. We encourage contributions that engage with popular texts of all kinds – from well-known authors (e.g. Sewall, Kingsley, Dickens) to lesser-known serials, periodicals, penny dreadfuls, or children's stories.

**Abstracts of c.400 words** and a brief, 50-word biographical note should be sent to Dr Bethany Dahlstrom and Dr Helena Esser at [VPFAnimals@gmail.com](mailto:VPFAnimals@gmail.com) by **10<sup>th</sup> May 2026**.

**The first round of completed articles (7,000–8,000 words)** will be due by **1<sup>st</sup> November 2026**. All submissions will undergo peer review in accordance with VPFJ's editorial policies. All articles are subject to peer review. Only previously unpublished work will be considered.

Full articles should follow the VPFJ Style Guide, which is available on the website and downloadable here: <https://victorianpopularfiction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/VPFJournalStyle-Guide-updated-June-2021.pdf>.